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Senate Panel Endorses Webster

Quick Floor Vote to Be Sought On Nominee for Top CIA Post

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The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence voted unanimously yesterday to endorse the nomination of FBI Director William H. Webster to become director of central intelligence, replacing the ailing William J. Casey who resigned in late January.

The 15-to-0 vote came after three public hearings devoted largely to Webster's knowledge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's dealings with fired National Security Council aide Lt. Col. Oliver L. North and a final, unscheduled 45-minute closed-door session yesterday regarding a mysterious "proposed communication" from North to the bureau that apparently was never sent.

Committee Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.), who congratulated Webster on the unanimous vote, said he planned to press for "an expeditious vote" of the full Senate.

"This is an extremely important position in the government. It needs to be filled as quickly as possible," Boren said.

The committee voted after agreeing again unanimously to waive one of its provisions that stipulates a vote cannot be taken until 48 hours after members have received a transcript of the last hearing, which was Thursday.

Boren said he expected the committee's unanimous recommendation for confirmation, based upon "a very, very thorough and careful investigation" of Webster's record as FBI director for the past nine years, to help speed a full vote in the Senate.

But Senate sources said it is unlikely the Senate will vote before the opening Tuesday of congressional hearings into the Iran-contra affair, which could bring to light additional evidence embarrassing to the FBI and Webster.

The committee chairman said the unexpected closed-door session yesterday concerned a communication on a "classified" subject from North to the National Security Council "that was supposed to be communicated to the FBI." He refused to say whether it concerned North's secret efforts to raise and channel money to the Nicaraguan contras.

"We were satisfied no such communication was ever executed," Boren said.

He added that the subject of yesterday's closed session was "the least substantive of all the matters we discussed during the confirmation hearings."

Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), who had pressed Webster the hardest on the FBI's dealings with North, voted for him yesterday but repeated that he is not satisfied with the way Webster and the bureau had handled aspects of the Iran-contra affair.

"His [Webster's] confirmation hearings suggest that the FBI, and to some extent Judge Webster himself, did not respond to clear warnings to stop Lt. Col. North's improper, if not illegal, activities," Specter said.

Specter said he realized that North's position on the National Security Council and President Reagan's commitment to the Nicaraguan anticommunist rebels had likely created a climate in which the FBI "winked at possible violations of law involving the contras."

The Webster confirmation hearings, the senator said, "show the need for preventive measures to stop" the kind of contacts North was having with FBI officials and to insist on "a rigorous investigative standard" by the bureau independent of "White House influence."

But Specter said he was "satisfied" Webster was qualified to become director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Webster, responding later to Specter's comments, said there were "individual situations that on examination and 20/20 hindsight we might have done differently" but insisted the FBI had pursued all investigations "aggressively."

"There were one or two documents that did not come to my attention that I wish had come to my attention," Webster said.

He said knowledge of these "might have influenced my thinking or awareness of some aspects" of North's attempts to influence FBI investigations into contra-related activities. But he insisted that none of North's attempts had resulted "in any change in our investigative patterns."

Webster and Committee Vice Chairman William S. Cohen (R-Maine) gave a vote of confidence to Robert M. Gates, the CIA deputy director who was first nominated by the White House to take Casey's place after he resigned Jan. 29 following surgery for a brain tumor. Reagan withdrew Gates' nomination March 2 after tough questions by Specter and others into his role in the Iran-contra affair. The White House nominated Webster the next day.

"I have a great deal of confidence in Mr. Gates and look forward to working with him," Webster said.

Much of the the committee's questioning was devoted to FBI reports and memorandums involving North and his activities that Webster said he had been unaware of until preparing for his confirmation hearing.

One memorandum, dated Oct. 30, 1986, indicated North might become a target in a criminal probe because of his role in providing arms to the Nicaraguan rebels. While Webster's initials were on the memo, indicating it had passed through his office, the FBI said he had forgotten the incident until just before the committee's April 9 hearing.

At Thursday's hearing, Webster produced a "lost" FBI report on a bureau interview with North at the White House on July 18, 1985, indicating North had discussed with Reagan a large private contribution to the contras by an Iranian posing as a Saudi prince.

These and other documents that were provided by the FBI to the Senate intelligence committee have made it clear North repeatedly called the bureau to inquire about, or attempt to interfere in, various investigations of companies and individuals involved in the Iran-contra affair.

The documents show that the FBI had considerable knowledge of North's activities but that neither Webster nor any of his aides took action to determine their legality.